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Elections of Ukrainian Orthodox Metropolitan: An Escalating Conflict?

Piotr Kościński

Ahead of the election of a new head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's Moscow Patriarchate, the largest congregation in Ukraine, disputes within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church are increasing. As Russian aggression in Ukraine continues, many of the faithful, especially those related to the Patriarchate of Kyiv, unrecognised by the Orthodox Communion, want unification and the creation of an autocephalous Orthodox Church. The election of a new Metropolitan who is heavily dependent on Moscow may lead to a reaction from the state-supported Kyiv Patriarchate, resulting in the creation of a single, independent Orthodox Church and an escalating religious conflict within the Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

The election of the new Metropolitan is planned for August 13; on this day, a sobor (council) of bishops of the Church, subordinate to Moscow (UOC MP), will be convened. It has been revealed that the Moscow Patriarch Kirill will not attend, because the Ukrainian authorities have stated that this is undesirable. No other representative of the Moscow Patriarchate or foreign Orthodox Churches will attend this meeting. This will allow the UOC MP hierarchy to discuss the election freely. But Ukrainian media show that Moscow is trying hard to influence them, so the election result will be favourable to Russia. For Ukraine, such a split Orthodox Church is of great political importance. However, it is also important for Russia, because the Russian Orthodox Church, closely related to the state authorities, sees Ukraine as its canonical territory. During five years in office, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia visited Ukraine more than 30 times.

Orthodoxy in Ukraine. Orthodoxy is the predominant religion. Even if some polls show that about 60% of the population are non-believers, many of them feel traditionally connected with Orthodoxy; among believers, more than 70% are Orthodox. There are three factions. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, consists of almost three times more parishes than the non-canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC KP), founded in 1982 and not recognised by world Orthodoxy, but polls show that it has fewer believers. The third faction, derived from the diaspora of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), is small. Though many clerics of the UOC MP have commented positively or neutrally on Maidan in Ukraine, Ukraine's current government treats UOC MP warily. In contrast, former president Viktor Yanukovich strongly supported UOC MP. After he escaped to Russia, information came to light that he tried to change the Metropolitan Volodymyr, who he considered too independent; this case is under investigation. Viktor Yushchenko, on the other hand, favoured the Kyiv Patriarchate.

Russia and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. For the Moscow Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Church is important for many reasons. The first is historical, because the baptism of Russia (988) took place on the territory of today's Ukraine, and from these areas Christianity spread throughout the territory of today's Russia. Second, there are political concerns, because the leadership of the Church, traditionally associated with the Russian authorities, repeatedly emphasised the unity of the society that inhabits the entire area of the former Soviet Union (and the old, imperial Russia), using both the term "Russian World" ("Russkiy Mir") and the concept of "Holy Russia," in which Orthodoxy is the main unifying factor. The third reason relates to organisation, because the Ukrainian Orthodox Church subordinate to Moscow consists of 13,000 parishes, while on the territory of Russia there are 15,000.

As many as 60% of all the clergy of the Moscow Patriarchate come from Ukraine, including many bishops in Russia. This means that the separation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church would ultimately weaken the Moscow Patriarchate, not to mention the fact that it might give rise to a tendency to create autocephalous churches in, for example, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

During the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich, Patriarch Kirill tried hard to strengthen his influence in Ukraine, and he was warmly welcomed by the president. Both he and his subordinate clergy in Russia strongly supported the actions of Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. In March, the spokesman of the Moscow Patriarchate, Vsevolod Chaplin, pointed out (as did other hierarchs of the Patriarchate), that the Russian people living on their historical territory are divided and have the right to unite in one state. He also called for the dispatch of a Russian peace-keeping mission to Ukraine. Kyrill made an appeal, which said nothing about Russian aggression, while pointing to the need to avoid deaths of the peaceful inhabitants of Ukraine, apparently referring to the supporters of integration with Russia.

In turn, Ukrainian separatists emphasise their relationship with UOC MP. The so-called popular governor of Donetsk, Paul Gubariev, underlined the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church blessed separatists for the war they were waging.

Nevertheless, under Metropolitan Volodymyr UOC MP retained some independence from Russia and tried to be neutral in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Maidan and the dramatic events in the east and south of Ukraine, the appearance of separatists supported by Russians and further fighting, caused disagreements in UPC MP. Some clerics supported Maidan.

There have been rumours about the pressure of the Moscow Patriarchate on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. On 28 July, the 1026th anniversary of the baptism of Russia was celebrated, and the Patriarchate allegedly planned to organise a sobor of UOC MP in Khersones Tavriysky, Crimea, the place of the baptism of Vladimir the Great. The presence of bishops in Crimea would have provided support for the Russian annexation of the peninsula. However, this did not happen, which shows the strong position of the bishops of Kyiv.

Unification and Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephaly. The desire to unite a divided Church is visible. However, while the "Muscovite" clergy believe that it would be appropriate to return everyone under the wing of the canonical Church, others strongly prefer to create a single, large autocephalous Orthodox Church. Poland, where until 1924 the Orthodox Church was subordinate, to the Moscow Patriarchate, can serve as an example; autocephaly for this Church came from the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

The intensity of the fighting in the east of Ukraine, and Russian aggression, results in frequent appeals to the hierarchy and the UOC MP faithful from the Kyiv Patriarchate, to move from the influence of a foreign country and to unite in a single Orthodox Church independent of Moscow.

These calls intensified after the death of Metropolitan Volodymyr. In July, Patriarch Filaret of Kyiv said that when the UOC MP elects its superior, who will want to work for the Ukrainian state, and not Russia, a dialogue on the creation of a single Church will be possible. Local hierarchs of the UOC KP call the believers to unite now. Recently, Rivne Archbishop Ilarion wrote a letter to his counterpart in the UOC MP, as did Metropolitan Mykhail of Lutsk.

In the village of Soloniv in Rivne oblast, a whole UPC MP parish recently moved to the Kyiv Patriarchate after the priest refused to perform prayers for the dead of Maidan and Donbas and emphasised their subordination to the Patriarch Kirill. This is an isolated case, but was very widely reported in the media.

However, the main candidates to succeed Volodymyr are accused by the Ukrainian media of having pro-Russian attitudes. Metropolitan Onufriy, of Bukovina and Chernivitsi, temporary head of the Church, has the greatest chance of winning. He recently made some controversial decisions. In July, he gave a Church order to the Uzhgorod priest Dmytro Sydor, the leader of the illegal Carpathian Ruthenians. In a letter to the president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, he argued that the Ukrainian army and special forces persecuted the UPC MP clergy in the Donbas. Metropolitan Antoni, of Boryspil and Brovary, a close associate of Yanukovich, is in second place. Neither of them will be willing to unite with the UOC KP or UAOC and create an autocephaly. There are no obvious opportunities for the emergence of a third, pro-Ukrainian candidate. As a result of the activities of supporters of Moscow, the most pro-Ukrainian hierarch, Archbishop Oleksandr (Drabynko), former Secretary of Metropolitan Volodymyr, was deprived of the possibility of seeking to lead the Church.

Conclusions. After the collapse of the USSR on the territory of Ukraine, no serious religious conflicts occurred, despite the operation of several competing Orthodox churches. Hostilities in the east of the country have changed this. The likely election of a pro-Russian candidate for the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's Moscow Patriarchate will probably receive a negative reaction from many of the Orthodox Communion, and this could be used by the Patriarchate of Kyiv to push through a plan to create a single Orthodox Church in Ukraine. This could result in a serious religious conflict between those faithful to the new metropolitan supported by Moscow, and the more nationally minded. Escalation of the conflict and the emergence of the first fatalities can be used by the Kremlin as a pretext for military involvement in Ukraine in order to defend the Orthodox Church loyal to the Moscow Patriarchate. Leaders in the West should emphasise to the authorities in Kyiv that, while the idea of uniting the Orthodox churches in Ukraine is correct and should be supported, the current environment makes such a move too risky and exposes Ukraine to greater military involvement by Russia.